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# Three Forms of Mediatized Religion

## *Changing the Public Face of Religion*

Stig Hjarvard

At the height of the Mohammed cartoon conflict in 2006, Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen stated that religion should be a private matter and not play a major role in the public sphere<sup>1</sup>. He was immediately countered by a number of religious representatives who – not surprisingly – argued that religion had a natural place in the public realm. The Mohammed cartoon conflict was not only a prominent example of a growing presence of religion in the public sphere, but also an indicator of the changing nature of the public face of religion and the difficulty of controlling public representations of religion. The controversies regarding the Mohammed cartoons of course did involve a traditional Islamic concern about whether or not to depict Mohammed in pictures, but the representation of Islam and the conflict itself were not primarily controlled by religious actors; rather, they were instigated and structured by a series of media dynamics, including the initial journalistic initiative to publish the cartoons, the news media's framing of Islam, public diplomacy through transnational satellite television, and popular mobilization through various mobile and digital media (Eide et al. 2008; Hjarvard 2010a; Stage 2011). In other words, it was a *mediatized conflict* (Cottle 2006) because the media became partly constitutive of the ways in which this clash over public representations of religion was played out.

The magnitude and repercussions of the Mohammed cartoon conflict were of course exceptional and the incident as such is not representative of the ways in which religion is represented in the public realm under less conflict-ridden circumstances. It does, however, bear witness to the fact that media have acquired an important role not only in the transmission of religious imagery, but also in the very production and framing of religious issues. Religious organizations and advocates may still produce their own public representations of religion, but the extent to which these get circulated is heavily influenced by the media system and religious organizations are more often forced to react to the media's representations of religious issues than the other way around. For

instance, the Catholic Church felt obliged to react to the popular books and movies by Dan Brown (Partridge 2008), and the news media's uncovering of widespread sexual abuse of boys by Catholic priests seriously influenced the Church's public reputation despite various attempts to apologize. The majority of public representations of religion are not disseminated by religious organizations, but are produced and circulated by the media and serve social functions other than those pursued by religious organizations.

The continued presence of various religious issues on the media's agenda and the problems organized religions encounter controlling the public images of their religion point to a more fundamental paradox that I have touched upon previously (Hjarvard 2011a), but would like to elaborate on here: the growth in religions' public media presence has *not* – at least in the case of the Nordic countries – been accompanied by a revival of organized religion. For instance, in Danish media there has been growing and continuous coverage of both Christianity and Islam as well as other religious issues since the 1980s (Rosenfeldt 2007), but the usual indicators of support for the national Protestant Church ('Folkekirken'), such as the number of baptized children, confirmations, church weddings and overall membership, indicate a slow, but steady decline. This decline in organized religion is partially offset by an increase in the number of some Islamic religious organizations and other immigrant religious communities, although other communities have also experienced a decline (Center for Samtidsreligion, 2009; 2010; 2011). The continued public media presence of religious issues does not seem to be a reflection of a growing commitment to organized religion. Instead, we are witnessing a paradoxical combination of high media attention to religious issues in the public realm and a slow, but steady decline of interest in organized religion at the individual and private level. This decline may not necessarily be synonymous with a decline in religious belief as such, but may be accompanied by a renewal of more individualized forms of religious imaginations and practices that may also find resonance in the media. From a theoretical point of view, the paradox points to the interconnections between the two general social processes of mediatization and secularization. The mediatization of religion (Hjarvard 2008) is changing the public representation of religion in late modernity at the same time that secularization (Bruce 2002; Dobbelaere 2002; Taylor 2007) is evoking both a decline and a transformation of religious organizations, practices and beliefs. How processes of mediatization and secularization are mutually interdependent – in some cases synergetic, in others conflicting – is a complex question that also needs to take into account other social and cultural processes like globalization, commercialization and individualization.

During the last decades, some scholars from theology and the sociology of religion have criticized and even denounced secularization theory. Peter Berger, once an ardent proponent of secularization theory himself, has used

the growing public presence of religion as an argument to declare the world as “furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever” and proclaim that “a whole body of literature by historians and social scientists loosely labeled ‘secularization theory’ is essentially mistaken” (Berger 1999: 2). In a similar way, Rodney Stark has stated that there is no evidence to support the proposition that modernity fosters secularization and declares: “it seems time to carry the secularization doctrine to the graveyard of failed theories” (Stark 1999: 270). These radical advocates of the death of secularization, however, do paint an oversimplified picture of secularization theory and tend to ignore the empirical evidence. Their rhetorical equation of secularization with the total disappearance of religion serves as a straw-man argument allowing them to announce the opposite, yet similarly one-dimensional development: the resurgence of religion all over the world. If we go several decades back, we may find some scholars of religion (including Peter Berger) talking about secularization as the end of religion. However, secularization theory in general is not predicting the total disappearance of religion, but is occupied with a series of structural transformations in modern societies: the diminishing role of institutionalized forms of religion in society, the accommodation of churches to secular contexts and the transformation of faith, including the rise of more individualized forms of beliefs (e.g., Bruce 2002; Dobbelaere 2002; Taylor 2007).

Social scientists like Norris and Inglehart (2004) and Inglehart and Welzel (2005) have conducted extensive cross-national and long-term empirical analyses pointing to the conclusion that secularization is still an important feature of modernization processes in contemporary societies in Western Europe, the USA and elsewhere. There are, quite obviously, also numerous variations and interesting exceptions, but the overall empirical data do not falsify basic tenets of the secularization paradigm. It may be interesting to note that Jürgen Habermas, who has lately been embraced by religious proponents and skeptics of secularization theory because of his arguments about the possibility of mutual learning processes between religious and secular actors in the public sphere, is very clear about this general empirical trend: “the data collected globally still provide surprisingly robust support for the defenders of the secularization thesis” (Habermas 2008: 19). Casanova (2007), who has been skeptical of certain tenets of secularization theory, nevertheless states that “[t]o drop the concept or the theory of secularization would leave us analytically impoverished and without adequate conceptual tools in trying to trace the ‘archeology’ and ‘genealogy’ of Western Modernity” (Casanova 2007: 103). In view of these qualifications, secularization is not about the end of religion, but about the transformation of religion in the modern world. Furthermore, it is not the only interesting theoretical framework of relevance for the study of media and religion, and, therefore, must also be accompanied by other strands of research (e.g., studies of religious rituals and worship). Secularization research is interesting, because

the mediatization of religion involves the decline of institutionalized religious authorities (and the rise of media as authorities) at the same time as the mediatization of religion also reflects the continued presence, transformation and significance of religious imaginations in secular societies.

From this perspective, the aim of the article is to address how processes of mediatization are changing the nature of public representations of religion in highly secularized societies like the Nordic countries. Furthermore, I will discuss how these transformations may be related to the ways that religious organizations, beliefs and practices are developing in the Nordic context of the dominant Christian Protestant Church. The argument will mainly be theoretical, but various statistics and examples are taken into consideration in order to illustrate and validate the general argument. More specifically, I will present a typology of *three different forms of mediatized religions* and each of these involves a particular way of communicating about religion in the public sphere: (1) *religious media*, (2) *journalism on religion* and (3) *banal religion*. Through this typology we may develop a higher sensitivity to the degrees and forms of mediatization that are taking place in the field of religion, as each of them reflect a specific mode of power and control over the representation of religion. Because the theme of this article is about the public face of religion, I deliberately focus on the representational aspects of media and only deal with mediated interaction in so far as it is relevant for the overall argument, for instance regarding the question of control over public representations.

### Mediatization: A double-sided process

The process of mediatization is certainly not restricted to the realm of religion, but denotes a much more general process through which a variety of social fields become dependent on the media. Historically, the concept of mediatization emerged as either a way to describe the growing media influence in the field of politics (Asp 1990; Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999) or to label the growing importance of media in post-modern or late-modern society in general (Baudrillard 1981; Thompson 1995). During recent years, both theoretical and empirical studies of mediatization have intensified and provided both nuances and stronger conceptual clarity to our understanding of mediatization processes (Krotz 2007; Hjarvard 2008a; Lundby 2009; Hepp, Hjarvard and Lundby 2010). In particular, the theory of mediatization has proved useful for the analysis and discussion of how media spread to, become intertwined with, and influence other cultural fields (Bourdieu 1993) and social institutions (Giddens 1984), like consumption (Jansson 2002), education (Friesen and Hug 2009; Hjarvard 2010b), research (Rödder and Schäfer 2010) and religion (Hjarvard 2008b). The ways that media come to influence and make other social fields dependent on

the media may vary both in degree and quality, and as in most social relations, it is also a reciprocal process. As media become intertwined with other social fields, media practices may also be influenced by the dominant *modus operandi* of the field in question. Thus, some media may prove more useful than others for the specific field in question, and the media may be appropriated in very different ways as they come to serve particular purposes in, for instance, the school, the workplace or the family.

Mediatization not only affects other social fields or institutions in a variety of ways, but also signifies a new social and cultural condition in which the media in general come to serve a different role in culture and society. A hundred years ago, media were predominantly in the service of other social institutions. The political press was to a large extent under the control of political parties and movements, and some journals and magazines served scientific, cultural or religious interests. For most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, radio and then later television were predominantly cultural institutions. Bestowed by law with public service obligations, broadcasting in the Nordic countries was not a media business, but a cultural institution that should enlighten the populace and provide an unbiased representation of the various institutions of society, like politics, industry, culture etc. Due to a variety of interrelated developments from the 1980s and onwards, including the deregulation of media industries, the arrival of new media technologies and a general climate of neoliberal policies, the media gradually became more commercial but also more independent of other social institutions. In a sociological sense, media became a media institution. They were to a much lesser extent in the service of other institutions (apart from the commercial market) and to a larger degree able to pursue their own interests as media organizations. Increasingly, media became governed by their own *modus operandi*, like technical possibilities, generic conventions and market considerations, and other institutions progressively had to accommodate to the demands of the media in order to gain access to one of the vital collective resources that media control: public representation.

The general process of mediatization is characterized by a double-sided development. On the one hand, the media acquired relative autonomy vis-à-vis other social institutions like politics and religion; on the other hand, the media became integrated into the very life-world of other institutions. Not least, digital and interactive media have become part and parcel of everyday life in almost all social institutions and have enabled both organizations and individuals to interact across time and space in much more flexible ways. The media are both present “out-there” in society as a relatively autonomous institution and available “in-here” as a resource for communicative interaction for organizations and individuals alike. The “in-here” dimension of mediatization from one point of view may empower individual social actors like politicians or ministers to bypass media organizations and communicate directly with their

respective followers in surprisingly new ways. As Lövheim (2011) has argued, the mediatization of religion also involves “the agency of religious actors and the possible vitality and significance of modern expressions of religion” (Lövheim 2011: 162). From another perspective, the usage of various forms of (interactive) media by organizations and individuals nevertheless requires a certain degree of adaptation to the various norms and characteristics of these media. For instance, if a church wants to use a blog or Facebook to communicate with possible followers, it must to some extent adhere to the already established conventions of these media as regards choice of appropriate topics, use of language, level of responsiveness etc. In this way, the “in-here” dimension of mediatization also induces a change in the ways that various institutions interact both internally and with the outside world.

Finally, the process of mediatization must be distinguished from the partly related concept of “mediation”. There may be no generally accepted definition of mediation, but for the sake of comparison we will consider mediation as the concrete act of communication through a medium. Thus, compared to non-mediated communication (i.e., face-to-face in co-presence), mediated communication extends human communication in time, space and ways of expressions. Due to the specific affordances and constraints of the media in question, the concrete instance of mediation may alter the form and content of the message and influence the relationship between the sender and receiver – compared to non-mediated forms of communication or other forms of mediated communication. But the particular instance of mediation does not alter the social institution itself or its relationship towards the outside world. Mediatization, by contrast, concerns the long-term process whereby social and cultural institutions and modes of interaction are changed as a consequence of the growth of the media’s influence. From this perspective, the mediatization of religion concerns the ways that religious organizations, practices and beliefs are altered through the increased presence of media both inside and outside the institution of religion.

## Mediatization of religion

As I have argued elsewhere, the mediatization of religion does not transform religion in a uniform way or produce a single outcome, but involves a variety of changes that interact with already existing developments in the field of religion, like individualization and secularization. Since the general characteristics of mediatized religion are spelled out in more detail elsewhere (Hjarvard 2008b; 2011a), for the sake of an overview, I will summarize key developments in relation to Meyrowitz’s (1986) three metaphors of media, each of which points to a cluster of media functions: media as conduits, media as languages, and media as environments:

- *Media as conduits.* The media have become an important, if not primary, source of information and experiences concerning religious issues. The media disseminate institutionalized religious texts only to a limited extent. Most often, the media use fragments of institutionalized religion and/or elements of folk religion, civil religion etc. combined in new ways. In journalistic genres, religion is usually portrayed through the frames of secular society, often involving a critical discourse on religious organizations, and in other media genres the iconography and liturgical practices of institutionalized religions and folk religions become stockpiles for media narratives, consumer advice and entertainment. Through this process, the media provide a constant backdrop of “banal religion” in society.
- *Media as languages.* The media not only produce and circulate religion, but also format religion in different ways, in particular through the genres of popular culture, like adventure, consumer guidance, reality television, science fiction etc. Since media do not have the intention to preach, but rather to get attention, they have a higher sensibility to the immediate cultural demands of various segments of the population. This often has the side effect of promoting individualism and consumer behavior – also in the area of spiritual issues – due to the commercial nature of popular media. The spread of interactive media allows people to express religious ideas and feelings in a variety of genres that usually have not been available to institutionalized religion.
- *Media as environments.* Media contribute to the production and altering of social relationships and cultural communities (Carey 1992; Morley 2000) and they have become crucial for the public celebration of major national and cultural events (Dayan and Katz 1994). The media ritualize social transitions at micro- and macro levels; provide moral orientation, emotional therapy and consolation in times of crises. As such, the media have in some respect taken over many of the social functions formerly provided by the church, but they are now performed within a predominantly secular discourse. Similarly, the media promote various forms of worship through fan culture, celebrity culture etc.

Accordingly, the mediatization of religion implies a multidimensional transformation of religion that affects religious texts, practices and social relationships and eventually the character of belief in modern societies. The outcome is not a new kind of religion as such, but rather a new social condition in which the power to define and practice religion has changed. Since processes of mediatization are sensitive to the social and cultural contexts, the aforementioned characteristics do not apply to all societies to the same degree, but may be more valid for northern European countries and, in particular, the



Nordic countries. As Lynch (2011) has observed, the mediatization of religion may be spelled out in the above-mentioned way in social contexts in which four characteristics are dominating: (1) mainstream media institutions have a non-confessional orientation and there is limited usage of media with a strong confessional orientation; (2) when the population has little direct engagement with religious institutions, mainstream public media have become the access point for engagement with religious symbols and narratives; (3) the existence of a clearly identifiable religious institution (e.g., the Protestant Church); and (4) a high degree of secularization at societal, organizational and individual levels (Lynch 2011: 205).

The Nordic countries share these four characteristics and we may therefore expect mediatization of religion to follow at least somewhat similar lines of development within these national contexts. It is important to stress, however, that even within the Nordic context there may be differences affecting the particular relationship between media and religion, which for instance the particular national variations regarding the Mohammed cartoon crisis bear witness to (see also Lundby and Thorbjørnsrud in this volume.). However, if there is one general outcome of the mediatization of religion in the Nordic countries, it is the diminishing ability of religious organizations (the churches) to control the public representation of both religion in general and the churches' interests in particular. In order to address the variety of ways that media come to influence religious development in the Nordic countries, I will distinguish between three forms of mediatized religion, each of which represents a particular institutional framing of mediatized religion: *religious media* are trying to create religious community and identity based on mediated participation; *journalism on religion* subjects religion to the dominant discourses of the political public sphere; and *banal religion* constructs religion as a cultural commodity for entertainment and self-development.

## Religious media

In regard to religious media, we are referring to media organizations and practices that are primarily controlled and performed by religious actors, either collectively (e.g., a church) or individually. They may encompass mass media, social network media and private personal media like the mobile phone. Because of our focus on public representation, we will limit ourselves to considering mass media and social network media with a public presence and usage. Historically, religious media have been numerous and even dominating within particular social and cultural contexts. Furthermore, particular media developments have spurred changes in religious communication and been implicated in transformations of religious institutions, practices and power

relationships. A significant example is the invention of the printing press in Europe around 1450, which allowed for the mass production and distribution of Christian texts and enabled a more personal relationship between the word of God and the Protestant followers to proliferate (Eisenstein 1979). In more recent history, television became a vehicle for televangelism in the United States, allowing various religious individuals to become charismatic religious leaders with a high public profile (Peck 1993). The televangelism phenomena is by no means restricted to the United States, but has proliferated to many other parts of the world, including India, where televangelism has developed into a “Masala McGospel” mixing various elements of Hinduism with American media culture (James 2010).

In a contemporary Nordic context, religious media play a more limited role. Today, only a few, smaller news media have religious affiliations or objectives, like the Danish newspaper *Kristeligt Dagblad* (2010 circulation: 26,267), the Norwegian newspapers *Dagen* (2010 circulation: 9,946) and *Vårt Land* (2010 circulation: 24,781), and the Swedish newspapers *Världen idag* (2010 circulation: 7,800) and *Dagen* (2010 circulation: 17,400)<sup>2</sup>. In broadcasting, there are a handful of Christian niche channels like the Danish *Københavns Kristne TV* (KKR/TV), Swedish *Kanal 10*, and Norwegian *Radio 10*, *Kanal 10* and *Vision Norge*. For the immigrant population, there are several religious satellite television channels and programs available (see also Galal, this volume) that comparatively speaking play a more important role in some immigrant communities than the Christian niche channels play for the general population. The public service broadcasters in the Nordic countries have a limited amount of explicit religious programming that either discuss religious issues typically within a journalistic format or transmit religious services, predominantly Christian Protestant services. In Denmark, the public service broadcaster DR has two regular Christian television programs, *Før søndagen* (Before Sunday) and *Gudstjeneste fra DR Kirken* (Service from the DR Church). *Før søndagen* has an average rating of 0.6% or 32,000 viewers and *Gudstjeneste fra DR Kirken* is followed by 0.8% of the population or 42,000 viewers (1<sup>st</sup> half-year 2011)<sup>3</sup>. The watching of religious ceremony is often a supplement to actual church attendance. The average viewer of *Gudstjeneste fra DR Kirken* attends religious service in a church (or synagogue, mosque etc.) four times as frequently as television viewers in general. On rare occasions, broadcasting of Christian Protestant services receive much larger audiences and blend with the general radio and television programming. During times of national crisis (e.g. natural disasters and terrorist attacks) or celebration (e.g. royal weddings and coronations) a church service may become integrated into a larger media performance ritualizing the national mourning or festivity. Under these circumstances church and media interact more directly and mediatization may be understood as a mutual adaptation to changing social conditions.

Through the Internet and other digital media, religious organizations including the Protestant Church have acquired a new venue for communicating directly with their followers and the wider public. Religious organizations typically exercise a higher degree of editorial control over the content of these new media compared to their limited influence on mainstream media like radio, television and newspapers. The general public's use of for instance Internet web sites with religious content is, however, rather limited. Fischer-Nielsen (2010: 78) reports on the basis of data from 2009 that less than 7% of the Danish population are frequent users (at least one visit a month) of websites with predominantly religious content. The same study also emphasizes that a very large number of Protestant ministers make use of the Internet in their daily work and this may come to influence their professional network and information flows in various ways. Thus, the Internet may be more important for the internal communication in religious organizations than for the external and public communication. Fisher-Nielsen (2010) concludes that "the ways in which religion is communicated and experienced online help to confirm and strengthen the secularization that characterizes Danish society, in the sense that the national Protestant Church ("folkekirken") and religious institutions in general do not dominate the religious communication online" (Fischer Nielsen 2010: 102; my translation).

The pluralization of religious voices on the Internet not only challenges the authority of established churches, but more individualized and networked forms of religious communication practices develop inspired by the general Internet culture. Højsgaard observes that the "cyber-religious field, moreover, is characterized by such features as role-playing, identity construction, cultural adaptability, fascination with technology, and a sarcastic approach to conformist religiosity" (Højsgaard 2005: 62). Blogs and other online forums provide a venue for religious actors to discuss various issues that may challenge previous experiences of religious beliefs and values and contribute to the construction of "religious autobiographies" (Lövheim 2005). Although such discussions may be important at the individual and group level of society, online forums rarely come to set the public agenda by themselves. Examining a variety of Danish online discussions on religion, Højsgaard (2004) observes that only in one instance did a debate find its way to the broader public and he concludes that regarding discussions of religion, "the Internet cannot be said to constitute a unifying or significant centre in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Danish society" (Højsgaard 2004: 286). In combination with other (mass) media, online discussions may, nonetheless, serve a supplementary function for the public discussion of religion, as for instance Lövheim and Axner's (2011) study of the Swedish "Halal-TV" debate demonstrates.

*Religious media* may be considered a less mediatized form of religion compared to *journalism on religion* and *banal religion*, since religious organiza-

tions or actors are in greater control of the communication. *Religious media*, however, must also accommodate the logic of the media in a variety of ways, and this may change not only the form and content of communication, but also influence the kinds of actors and relationships that are considered legitimate and relevant. When entering the general media's public sphere, religious media come to be judged by the same standards as other media, including their ability to use technology and genres in an appropriate and interesting way. Religious actors with greater media capabilities may challenge existing religious authorities and both old and new actors are prompted to copy the media's general responsiveness to audiences and users.

### Journalism on religion

The growing news coverage of both Christianity and Islam (Rosenfeldt 2007) not only reflects a quantitative development of more journalistic attention to organized religion, but also a qualitative change in which religion has moved from the margins of journalism and has become a recurrent theme within a variety of general news issues or "news beats" as they are labeled by journalists. For instance, the growing journalistic attention to Islam is not least due to the role of Islam in relation to social and political news on immigration, crime and terrorism. As a consequence, the focus of the news report involving Islam is usually not on religious issues per se, but on the allegedly problematic concomitants of Islam in relation to social and political issues (Andreassen 2007; Hervik 2002; 2011; Stage 2011).

From an institutional perspective, journalism's increased reporting on religion reflects a change in the power to define and frame religion. Both religion and journalism are communicative institutions that address a public audience in order to influence its world-views, but the norms and practices that govern the two institutions' communicative actions are very different. Journalism emerged as the craft of a particular group of media workers in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, journalists gradually acquired professional legitimacy through their adherence to emerging cultural norms from two other institutional domains: norms of objectivity from the sciences and democratic ideals from the political world (Schudson 1978; Tuchman 1972). As a consequence, journalism is clearly positioned as a secular practice devoted to facticity and sees itself as a fourth estate of power controlling the possible misuse of power by other social institutions, including the church. Accordingly, *journalism on religion* brings religion into the political public sphere and subjects it to journalism's dominant paradigms of facticity and public accountability. We should, of course, be careful not to take the self-conception of journalism as an accurate or sufficient description of what journalists do and what journalism is all about.

The journalistic profession certainly adheres to the notions of objectivity and impartiality, but numerous studies have shown that the news can be framed in various ways and thereby comes “to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (Entman 1993: 52). Unintentionally or not, news media are part of the (political) agenda setting process and thereby implicated in the continuous production of both social facts and opinions (McComb 2004). As Hartley (2009) has argued, journalism is not only to be associated with democratic process and political deliberation, but is also deeply embedded in the broader popular culture. Journalism was initially – and still is – also a market-driven activity providing entertainment and voice to popular sentiments (McManus 1994; Franklin 1997). Journalistic coverage of religion will therefore also serve purposes other than rational deliberation, such as, sensationalism or the celebration of cultural events. Nevertheless, journalism has – not least in the Nordic countries – developed as a semi-independent institution that has increasingly kept an arm’s length distance to not only political parties, but also other interest groups, including religious organizations. The majority of news media consider themselves secular organizations with no intention to treat religious organizations or issues any differently than any other organization or issue.

Because journalism has acquired control of a particular and important practice of public representation, news reporting, religious organizations or individuals have to accommodate to the demands of journalism in order to gain access to this mediated public arena. In general, this means they have to comply with two important logics of journalism: the criteria of *newsworthiness* and the *role of a source*. Religious organizations get access to news media in so far as their information is considered newsworthy, i.e., meets journalistic news criteria concerning social significance, topicality, closeness etc. (Hjarvard 2011b). If they comply with these criteria, they may be given a voice in the news media, but in order to do so, they must also act in accordance with the social role of a reliable and relevant news source. As a news source, they are expected to provide information and express opinions, but they will only be quoted to the extent that they – in the eyes of journalists – provide credible information (i.e., factual and objective) and relevant opinions (i.e., in accordance with the story line). News sources, of course, are not completely at the mercy of the journalists, and news sources may in various ways come to influence the news agenda and frame the ways stories get reported. Because journalists need sources to report the news, they also have to be responsive to sources and negotiate the framing of the news (Blumler and Gurevitch 1981). Even so, religious organizations cannot speak through the news media using their own communication genres (e.g., sermon, prayers etc.) and norms of credibility (e.g., references to Holy Scriptures). In order to have a voice in the political public sphere, they have to make news and act as sources.

As a prominent form of mediatized religion, *journalism on religion* reduces the ability of organized religious organizations and individuals to define and frame religious issues in the public sphere and they are subsequently much more exposed to public criticism based on the general social and political norms of secular society. Christensen (2010) has documented how various forms of religious authority have presence – or no presence – in the public sphere of media and parliaments in the Scandinavian countries. As regards Christianity, more traditional or dogmatic forms of religious authority do not exert any particular influence in the public sphere, but in Norway and Sweden, newspaper articles may occasionally represent Christianity as a natural part of public life, for instance in concert announcements and obituaries (Christensen 2010: 105). Christianity may therefore still exert a kind of cultural authority due to its historical legacy in Nordic countries, but only in so far as the values in question are not considered out of sync with the surrounding society. For instance, journalistic news coverage of questions concerning gender equality and homosexuality typically represent Christianity and the Church as less committed to equality and tolerance than the rest of society (Christensen 2010; see also Christensen's article in this volume).

Because of journalism's commitment to secular values of the general society, news media often come to serve as an instrument to "modernize" religion, i.e., exposing and correcting non-acceptable norms and behavior. The recent news coverage of the Catholic Church in Danish news media may serve as an example of this. Because few Danes are members of the Catholic Church, Danish news media rarely report on Catholicism and mainly in relation to foreign affairs. However, the recent scandals concerning the sexual abuse of children and youth in the Catholic Church also had repercussions in Denmark, where several Catholic priests were accused of sexual abuse of minors, and this increased the general attention in the news towards the Catholic Church in Denmark. The Danish newspaper *Berlingske Tidende* had intensive coverage of these issues and made Catholicism a particular news theme ("Aktuelt emne") on its website<sup>4</sup>. This themed collection of 100 news reports from *Berlingske Tidende* in 2010 gives a condensed picture of the newspaper's selection and framing of news about a particular religion. Of the 100 news stories, 87 dealt with cases concerning sexual abuse of children and youth and apart from focusing on the abuse itself, they were also highly critical of the Catholic Church's handling of the accusations. Generally, the news stories portrayed the leadership of the Catholic Church as either incompetent or trying to cover up the criminal misconduct of its priests. Eight news stories concerned the death of a Catholic nun who was mistreated at a convent in Djursland and in these stories we find a similar critical framing of the Catholic leadership. Two stories dealt with the Catholic Church's slightly changing policy towards contraception, and one story reported on the dismissal of a German bishop accused of

physical violence against children and financial misconduct. Finally, *Berlingske Tidende* had two articles dealing with celibacy and only in this case do we find articles that are not in one way or another directing criticism towards the Catholic Church. Still, at least one of the articles was a kind of defense against criticism voiced elsewhere that celibacy may at least indirectly be the cause of Catholic priests' sexual abuse of minors.

The critical news coverage of the Catholic Church concerning pedophilia was certainly not restricted to the pages of *Berlingske Tidende*, but was an international phenomenon. In general, it was an almost textbook example of a media scandal (Thompson 2000) with the Catholic Church and its priests in the role of the culprits. The Catholic Church both nationally and internationally (through the Pope and the Vatican state) tried to counter the growing criticism in various ways, including criticizing the press. This, however, only demonstrated that the Catholic Church had clearly misjudged its ability to define and frame the public representation of itself. In view of the Vatican state's accusation of news media for being too critical against the church, the chief editor of *Berlingske Tidende*, Lisbeth Knudsen, only re-asserted the right of journalism to criticize the Catholic Church: "the news media's critical stories are not a smear campaign. If the media are to be accused of anything, it is for having paid too much respect for religious feelings and clerical authority" (April 17, 2010). The very critical framing of the Catholic Church may in part be explained by the fact that both Catholicism and its Church are considered culturally alien and thus command less authority in the minds of journalists and news media. But the absence of traditional or dogmatic authority of Protestantism in the public sphere points to the fact that the (occasional) cultural authority of Protestantism has been achieved through an accommodation to the secular values that are promoted by *journalism on religion* and other modern institutions of society like the school, science and politics.

### Banal religion

Journalism is, however, not the only way in which media dominate the production and distribution of religious imaginary. If news media and journalism bring religion into the political public sphere, other media and genres make religion visible in the *cultural* public sphere. In mainstream cultural media, like magazines, novels and journals, radio, television, film and computer games, there is generally very little content explicitly dealing with religion. Representations of religious issues, symbols and actors are usually a marginal phenomenon and typically appear in relation to issues and stories that have no explicit, elaborate or intentional religious meanings. For instance, fantasy stories and games like *World of Warcraft* involve a huge inventory of avatars and objects with magic



qualities, but they are generally not to be considered as part of a manifest religious universe. Advertising often plays with religious references in order to evoke connotations of authenticity or just to make fun, but rarely in order to sell a religious message (Endsjø and Lied 2011). Similarly, personal advice columns in magazines may occasionally feature advice by Protestant ministers, but they appear on a par with doctors, psychologists and coaches in terms of personal development, and are usually not inclined to preach a particular gospel, but provide more general life-help mixed with spiritual references. Even though such representations of religion are de-contextualized from institutionalized religious settings and appear in media with no intention to preach a particular religious gospel, they nevertheless provide a continuous backdrop of imagery that reminds audiences of the presence of supernatural phenomena. Such representations of de-contextualized and non-intentional religious meanings constitute another form of mediatized religion: *banal religion*.

The term banal religion is derived from Michael Billig's (1995) study of nationalism and culture in which he coins the term *banal nationalism*. Usually the study of nationalism has focused on the explicit ideologies (e.g., fascism or populism) and cultural symbols (flags and royalty) of nationalism, but nationalism is not only a product of such obvious nationalistic phenomena. Nationalism is also created and reproduced through the circulation of a wide variety of representations and actions that are not explicitly nationalistic or do not necessarily reflect any deliberate attempt to propagate nationalism. Billig (ibid.) distinguishes metaphorically between waved and unwaved flags of nationalism, i.e., between the overt nationalistic symbols and actions and the implicit signs of national belonging embedded in everyday occurrences. Thus, symbols of Swedishness or Norwegianness may be explicit and intentional or implicit and unintentional. Banal nationalism, then, denotes the widespread, yet unnoticeable symbols and actions that may unwillingly reinforce the individual's sense of belonging to a specific nation state and national culture.

In a similar vein, *banal religion* denotes the media presence of a variety of symbols and actions that implicitly and perhaps unwillingly may reinforce the public presence of religion in culture and society. Banal religion makes use of a variety of rituals and symbols from institutionalized religions (e.g., crosses, monks and prayers) as well as folk religions (e.g., black cats, witches and vampires), but mixes and rearticulates them in new contexts relatively independent of their traditional meanings. For instance the Harry Potter stories by J. K. Rowling may be read as a secular narrative mixing popular genres like fantasy, adventure and the boarding-school story, but they nevertheless comprise a rich variety of supernatural elements. From one point of view, the presence of magic and supernatural beings may simply be considered a product of the genres in question and therefore not to be taken seriously. From another point of view, the value of the stories also arises from their ability to make this inventory of



supernatural elements vivid and salient in the minds of a modern audience. In this way, banal religious elements come to reproduce the presence of religion in a secular world, but without promoting a particular religious belief.

It is important to stress that *banal religion* is not a pejorative term suggesting a lack of religious importance or seriousness compared to for instance institutionalized forms of religion. If such comparisons make sense at all, it may be the other way around. From the perspective of evolutionary and cognitive anthropology (Boyer 2001), banal religion may be considered a primary or fundamental form of religion that tends to emerge in almost all human societies. It relies on basic cognitive functions that ascribe anthropomorphic agency to unexplainable occurrences and make use of counterintuitive categories to arrest attention, support memory and evoke emotions (Barrett 2004). Human cognition is predisposed to infer intentional agency behind any kind of happening, like the sudden strike of lightning or the recovery of a very sick person. Similarly, counterintuitive phenomena, like horses with wings or humans walking on water, appear much more salient to the human mind than their realist and indeed trivial counterparts, like horses with legs or humans swimming in water. Banal religious elements make up the brick and mortar of every religion, but banal religion in itself does not necessarily entail any elaborate propositions about religious doctrines or moral statements about the meaning of life.

The term “banal” also indicates that these religious elements may travel more easily below the radar of conscious thinking: their implicit, de-contextualized and non-propositional character, make them unnoticeable as representations of or statements about religious issues, but they nevertheless provide a backdrop of religiosity in society. As previously noted, both folk religion and institutionalized religions like Islam and Christianity make use of banal religious elements, but here they usually have become part of more explicit, elaborate and deliberate religious narratives, propositions or symbols. As such, folk religion and institutionalized religion make up a stockpile or inventory of banal religious elements from which the media may pick and choose in order to create new stories or symbols. Banal religion is a bricolage of decontextualized elements from a variety of sources, including institutionalized religious texts, iconography and liturgy, brought into new contexts and serving purposes other than those of religious institutions. Journalism on religion may also evoke various forms of banal religious elements when reporting on religious institutions and affairs. For instance, newspaper reports about Catholicism may be illustrated by pictures showing various disconnected symbols of Christianity or Catholicism that do not support the journalistic story but simply serve to signal religiosity. Here banal religion becomes a kind of vague backdrop to journalism’s manifest and specific inquiry into the particular doings and wrongdoings of the Catholic Church.

Two media genres seem to have played a particularly important role during the recent years for the proliferation of banal religious elements: factual entertainment on television and fictional drama across a variety of media platforms, like books, television drama series, feature films and computer games. Reality television during the last two decades has emerged as a major entertainment genre (Hjarvard 2002; Hill 2007), and within this framework subgenres concerned with various forms of spiritual, paranormal and supernatural phenomena have emerged. Danish television reality series like TV2's *The Power of the Spirits* ('Åndernes magt') and TV3's *The Return of the Spirits* ('Ånderne vender tilbage') "documented" paranormal phenomena, and TV2's *Travelling with the Soul* ('På rejse med sjælen') discussed the question of re-incarnation. The reality crime show has also opened up for the supernatural dimension; for instance, Danish Channel 4's *Sensing Murder* ('Fornemmelse for mord') makes use of clairvoyant investigators to solve old murder mysteries. Outside the reality genre, we find other entertainment programs playing with supernatural dimensions, like Danish TV2's quiz show *The Sixth Sense* ('Den 6. Sans') or TV2 Zulu's therapeutic program *The Oracles* ('Oraklerne'). Referring to many of the same television series in a Norwegian context, Endsjø and Lied (2011: 71) observe that "in Norway in the 2000s, popular culture has become one of the most visible exponents of belief in spirits and imaginations of the immortal soul" (my translation).

Many of these programs are based on international formats circulating in many countries. As Hill (2011) has demonstrated in her reception studies of the ghost hunter reality program *Most Haunted* in Britain, these programs not only suggest various forms of supernatural occurrences, but the embedding of these representations in specific media formats come to influence the ways audiences come to engage with supernatural aspects. Viewers are familiar with the narrative conventions of reality television and this provides them with a repertoire of possible responses: knowledge of entertainment conventions may provide audiences with both a playful and skeptical attitude towards the occurrences, while the documentary format still invites viewers to become at least "uncertain believers" (Hill 2011: 81). In general, mediatized religion in the form of reality television has not only made elements of folk religion and "superstition" much more publicly visible, but it has also come to frame these elements in specific ways. Because supernatural phenomena have to serve entertainment purposes in the media, these phenomena are only dealt with in so far as they can comply with this demand. As a result, the various programs oscillate between playing with, criticizing and believing in supernatural phenomena.

The proliferation of banal religion through fictional drama does not generally originate from the Nordic countries themselves, but rather from the import of popular Anglo-American drama. Not least due to a very strong tradition of realism in the Nordic countries, domestic mainstream drama has shown only

modest interest in religious themes, magic occurrences or spiritual issues in general. Television crime fiction like the Danish serial *Unit One* ('Rejseholdet') and popular crime novels by the Swedish author Åsa Larsson may occasionally involve elements of magic realism like psychic visions or voices of dead people, but these religious aspects are usually not at the center of the story line, but rather stylistic features serving to construct emotionally engaging characters. In Nordic crime fiction, conservative or fundamentalist religious people are often stereotyped as culprits on a par with perverse sex criminals and greedy Mafiosi, suggesting that (too) strong religious feelings may lead to antisocial behavior. This criticism of strong religion is also found outside the crime genre in mainstream feature films like the Swedish drama *As it is in Heaven* ('Så som i himmelen') and the Danish drama *In Your Hands* ('Forbrydelser'), which provide critical comments regarding the role of the Christian church and ministers and instead paint a positive vision of the inner spiritual force of ordinary people. If we go beyond the realm of popular culture and move into the terrain of purely artistic film, we find several Nordic directors with a preference for stories with allusions or explicit references to the Bible or other religious motives, for instance Ingmar Bergman, Carl Th. Dreyer and Lars von Trier. For a contemporary audience, the works of these artists, however, may be interpreted as existentialist discussions by use of religious allusions rather than works making religious claims. In general, drama produced within the Nordic countries tends to reflect the general secular development in which the authority of the Christian church is severely questioned and individualized forms of faith appear more attuned to the demands of modern life.

In the Nordic countries, Anglo-American products, as in many other parts of the world, occupy a prominent position in the consumption of fictional narratives on almost every media platform: books, films, television series, computer games etc. (Sepstrup 1990; Thussu 2006). The import of Anglo-American fiction has increased during the last decades due to the deregulation of media industries and the proliferation of many more media outlets, in particular television channels with an almost insatiable appetite for more television series to fill up airtime. This has not only increased the number but also the generic variation of Anglo-American fiction products available to Nordic audiences. As a result, a wide variety of fictional narratives involving banal religious elements has acquired a public presence in the cultural realm. Prominent examples of these are American television series like *X-files*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Ghost Whisperer*, *True Blood* and *Fringe*, which deal with various supernatural occurrences within generic formats like crime, sci-fi, fantasy, comedy, adventure etc. In a detailed analysis of the American television drama series *Supernatural*, Petersen (2010) observes that the series in a playful manner reworks religious concepts and renegotiates religious imaginations. This is done, for instance, by connecting banal religious elements to

existential themes and through playful intertextuality. Clark (2008) examines online discussion forums concerning the American television series *Lost* and concludes that this type of program frames religious symbols and narratives through the lenses of popular culture and “evoke religious symbolism and narratives within contexts that are outside the bounds of what is normally considered ‘religious’” (Clark 2008: 159). As Petersen (this volume) demonstrates in her analysis of young fan groups’ reception of the American movie series *Twilight Saga*, the secular context of the Danish society gives banal religious representations in popular narratives a prominent role as providers of religious imaginations: “the absence of a homogenous religious worldview allows these teenagers’ religious imaginations to be informed by the transformed and disconnected banal religious concepts they come across in media narratives” (Petersen, this volume: 179). As with journalism on religion, banal religion may occasionally provide criticism of organized religion, but generally it is open to a huge variety of religious, spiritual and magical orientations. In this way, it provides an often playful cultural backdrop of religious imagination and in a Nordic context with limited exposure to the communication of organized religious interests American popular culture becomes a significant factor for the public representation of religion.

### Visible difference

Religion has acquired a growing presence in the public domain during the last couple of decades not least because of growing media attention to various religious phenomena. This may in some cases reflect an increased importance of religious organizations or beliefs in society like the rise of political Islam and a growing number of immigrants with an Islamic background in the Nordic countries. The public media presence is not, however, synonymous with a general religious renaissance. The general commitment to the Protestant churches in the Nordic countries continues to decline, not dramatically, but at a slow, steady rate. Similarly, indicators of support for other religious organizations or more individual forms of beliefs do not bear witness to alternative forms of religious revival. The simultaneous development of high public media presence and low private support for institutionalized religion may, however, not be paradoxical. We are witnessing a change in the public face of religion due to – among other factors – the growing mediatization of religion. In this article, I have identified three different forms of mediatized religion, each of which represents a particular way of giving voice to and visual representation of religious issues and actors. The main characteristics of the three forms of mediatized religion are summarized in table 1.

**Table 1.** Key characteristics of three different forms of mediatized religion

	<b>Religious media</b>	<b>Journalism on religion</b>	<b>Banal religion</b>
<i>Dominant genres</i>	Religious services, preaching, confessions, discussions	News, current affairs, moderated debate	Narrative fiction, entertainment, self-help services, consumer advice
<i>Institution in primary control</i>	Religion	Journalism	Media
<i>Religious content</i>	Interpretations of religious texts and moral advice	Utterances and actions of religious actors framed by secular news values	Bricolage of texts, iconography and liturgy of various institutional and folk religions
<i>Role of religious agents</i>	Owners, producers, performers	Sources	Fictional representations of ministers and believers; in factual genres social counselors, entertainers etc.
<i>Communicative functions</i>	Persuasion Social rituals Religious community	Information Critical scrutiny Political public sphere	Entertainment Cultural rituals Self-development
<i>Challenge to Protestant Church</i>	Multiple and individualized religious voices and visual representations	Critical of religious institution if out of sync with secular values	A bricolage of religious representations provides a backdrop of cultural knowledge about religion

As stated earlier, mediatization may involve varying and in some cases contradicting developments, e.g., in some cases promoting secular values, in other cases producing new forms of religious imagery. Despite these differences, it seems possible to discern two general trends of religious transformation in the Nordic countries that are partly an outcome of mediatization: the Protestant Church has lost some of its former authority to define and frame religion in both the political and cultural public sphere and popular media formats have come to play an important role for the public dissemination of religious symbols, beliefs and practices. As various types of *religious media* become available, a plurality of more or less organized religious voices can be heard and the use of social network media for religious communication may favor a more individualized orientation towards religious belief and practice. *Journalism on religion* has become an authority to scrutinize religious organizations and actors if their attitudes or behavior are out of sync with general secular values. And finally, through *banal religion*, a bricolage of religious symbols, beliefs and practices are produced and circulated outside the framework of organized religion and without any necessary intention to preach a particular gospel. As with other

long-term structural processes of modernity like globalization and individualization, mediatization is changing the structural conditions for the practice of religion in the modern world. It is not only such a silent force of modernity, but it makes a highly visible difference by changing the public face of religion.

## Notes

1. In Denmark's Radio's (DR) television program "Profilen" (15.02.06).
2. Circulation figures according to Svensk Tidningsstatistik (TS), Dansk Oplagskontrol (figures concern 2nd half-year 2010) and Norsk Oplagskontroll/ Mediebedriftenes Landsforening.
3. Television ratings figures available from TNS Gallup.
4. [www.b.dk/katolsk](http://www.b.dk/katolsk)

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This book presents new research on the changing relationship between the media, religion and culture from a Nordic perspective, while engaging with the theory of the mediatization of religion. In contemporary society, news journalism, film and television series, as well as new digital media, provide critical commentary on religion while also enabling new forms of religious imagery and interaction. Religious leaders, communities and individuals reflexively negotiate their presence within this new mediatized reality. In an increasingly globalized Nordic context, the media have also come to play an important role in the performance of both individual and social identities, and in the representation and development of social and religious conflicts. Through empirical analysis and theoretical discussions, scholars from film and media studies, the sociology of religion, and theology contribute to the development of the theory of the mediatization of religion as well as to the broader research field of media, religion and culture.

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